

MEDICARE LIMIT OF \$1,780 SHOULD END, SAYS ENSIGN

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WASHINGTON -- Sen. John Ensign, R-Nev., told medical and patient groups on Wednesday that he opposes Medicare funding caps for physical therapy.

"Know that you have a friend on the Senate Finance Committee now," said Ensign, who was appointed to the powerful committee in July.

The American Heart Association and the American Stroke Association sponsored a news conference to rally support for legislation to abolish what they call "arbitrary" limits on rehabilitation therapy for Medicare patients.

Medicare covers the first \$1,780 of physical therapy.

After that the patient must apply for an exception, which is only authorized through this year.

Medicare spends more than \$12 billion a year caring for stroke patients, according to Stephanie Mohl, government relations manager of the American Stroke Association.

"Effective post-stroke rehabilitation can prevent future health complications, improve recovery and allow patients to live independently, all of which may ultimately save Medicare money," Mohl said in a statement.

For Ensign, the issue is personal.

"My eyes were opened with my grandmother," he said.

Ensign said his grandmother, Marge Cirpiani of Las Vegas, needed more therapy than most patients after undergoing a total knee replacement operation in 1995.

She faced the prospect of having her therapy cut off because of arbitrary Medicare caps, Ensign said.

"Obviously, we would have helped her with those kinds of services, but I think about other folks who are in the same situation who maybe necessarily couldn't afford it," Ensign said.

Ensign said his grandmother would have been bedridden for the rest of her life without the physical therapy she received. Instead, she lived independently for another five years and "was able to enjoy a good quality life," he said.

Ensign introduced a bill in January to abolish the Medicare caps for rehabilitation therapy. The bill has 33 co-sponsors, including 20 Democrats.

A similar bill in the House by Rep. Xavier Becerra, D-Calif., has 178 co-sponsors.

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